

Cultivating Swift Trust in Virtual Teams in Online Courses

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The use of virtual teams is a well-established strategy in online courses for cultivating students' social presence, an essential component of the community of inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2001), a well-known, validated framework (Stenbom, 2018) for designing online learning experiences. The

community of inquiry framework consists of three major interrelated elements necessary for quality, effective online education: (1) cognitive presence, (2) social presence, and (3) teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2001). A key principle for developing social presence is incorporating open communication and trust (Garrison, 2017). Team trust is critical for positive team functioning and outcomes (Hacker et al., 2019). Yet, "trust formation is a dynamic process that takes different forms at different stages of a relationship" (Robert et al., 2009, p. 268).

Although there are many different definitions and types of trust, most scholars agree that trust is a multidimensional, complex, and evolving construct (Mitchell & Zigurs, 2009). In this article, I provide a brief definition of swift trust, a type of trust unique to those who work in temporary teams, such as virtual teams in online courses. Swift trust supports development of online learners' social presence which involves their feelings of connectedness to others associated with a course in addition to course content in general. It also helps students develop positive and productive relationships necessary for completing assignments—and learning in the process.



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WHAT IS SWIFT TRUST?

According to Meyerson et al. (1996), swift trust is

the trust that unfolds in temporary systems ... [that] is more accurately portrayed as a unique form of collective perception and relating that is capable of managing issues of vulnerability, uncertainty, risk, and expectations. These four issues become relevant immediately, as soon as the temporary system begins to form. We argue that all four issues can be managed by variations in trusting behavior, and if they are not managed, participants act more like a permanent crowd than a temporary system. It is the configuration of these variations in behavior that accounts for the unique form that trust assumes in temporary systems, a form that we call swift trust. (p. 2)

Key features of swift trust are its temporality, vulnerability, uncertainty, risk, and expectations.

WHY IS SWIFT TRUST IMPORTANT TO ONLINE LEARNING?

In online courses, students are often required to work collaboratively on short- and long-term assignments (i.e., on temporary virtual teams) even though they may not know one another. Virtual teams often require they work on assignments that might range from only a few hours of collaboration to full semester or even year-long collaborations. It is not unusual for online students to be working with several different teams in different courses. It can be very challenging for students to work with other learners when they have never met one another, have limited time to get to know one another, and their grades depend on the performance of their team. Working in virtual teams for a grade requires that team members depend on and trust one another—quickly. Clearly, teams that work on longer-term projects will have time and experience to build

trust, but when teams are first created, they typically need to develop swift trust until they form deeper levels of trust.

HOW CAN INSTRUCTORS SUPPORT STUDENTS AS THEY DEVELOP SWIFT TRUST?

Researchers who have investigated swift trust in high performing virtual teams have found that they are communicative, optimistic, task-oriented, and proactive, among several other characteristics (Iacono & Weisband, 1997; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Zakaria & Yusof, 2020). There are several ways in which instructors can support students as they work in virtual teams (Milman, 2015) to develop swift trust. The following outlines a few:

1. **Icebreakers:** Provide opportunities for students to get to know one another, particularly their teammates. Icebreakers can include simple activities like pairing up and introducing one another to more involved team building activities such as scavenger hunts, games, or virtual coffees/teas/webconferences.
2. **Team charter:** Instructors can require or encourage virtual teams to develop a team charter. A team charter is a document that team members create collaboratively that outlines the goals, objectives, norms, roles, responsibilities, and deadlines for the team. Norms could include preferred mode and frequency of communications, in addition to procedures the team might follow (e.g., rotation of who takes notes to summarize meetings).
3. **Instructor-team check-ins:** Schedule team check-ins or require some type of reporting for team members to communicate collectively and individually what is working well and what could be improved within their teams, as well as to share progress on their assignment(s).

4. **Require a project report:** Instructors can require students document their work in the form of a project report. This might include who completed what work and how much time it took for them to completed it. This holds team members accountable for their contributions to the team.
5. **Individual and peer review:** Evaluation of each team member's contribution is another way for students to build accountability when working in virtual teams.

Trust is a critical component to the teaching-learning process. Cultivating the swift trust of virtual teams in online courses can be an engaging part of an online course that can also foster social presence.

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